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Dr. King's Words Find A Voice In The Law Of U.S. Congresswoman DeGette

By Wayne Trujillo

"I remember Dr. King's assassination as the turning point in my life. I was watching the TV coverage and they were showing old footage of Civil Rights marches and Rosa Parks. And it was the first time I was exposed to any of that. And it was right there at that moment -- really -- the turning point in my life. I decided that I was going to go to law school. And I decided I was going to dedicate my life to civil rights and equal justice."

- U.S. Congresswoman Diana DeGette

What began as a child reacting to the slaying of an unfamiliar man and his non-violent battles for equality engenders accolades and support for U. S. Congresswoman Diana DeGette from many of the staunchest curators of his dream.

A trilogy of assassinations -- King and the Kennedy brothers -- reduced our nation to tears and left America with a trinity of martyrs who, to this day, personify both the decade's turmoil and utopian aspirations.

King's passing marked more than a moment in the childhood of Colorado's 1st Congressional District's representative, Diana DeGette -- it defined her entire life.

She was a pre-teen when footage of past Civil Rights events played repeatedly as a backdrop to Dr. King's death at a Memphis motel. History books show grainy scenes of several men leaning against the balcony of a drab two-story motel. And the images replayed through Congresswoman DeGette's words are more vivid than any viewed on video or DVD.

What transformed the young girl into perhaps Colorado's greatest warrior for equal justice

"I tell her that she made it possible for someone like me to serve in Congress. She was the rabble-rouser breaking down the wall." DeGette pointed out that her predecessor blazed another trail by being among the first U.S. Congresswomen to excel at the formidable dual titles of mother and lawmaker.

The *Rocky Mountain News* ran an article last summer spotlighting DeGette's assertive queries to the Bush Administration about the lack of elusive weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The newspaper reported the details and noted DeGette's rapidly expanding celebrity on a national scope. Despite the personality variances, politicians and constituents alike learned that DeGette possesses equal fervor to Schroeder in speaking out and standing up for ideals favored by her ideal of justice. But when DeGette entered Congress, some questioned how anybody could possibly fill Schroeder's shoes or seat in Congress.

The past seven years have answered any doubts about DeGette's presence on Capitol Hill. Her first four terms in Congress include sitting on the House Energy and Commerce Committee with an oversight of trade, business, technology, and consumer protection. The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations demanded an accounting from Enron, Tyco, and other corporations gripped by scandals. DeGette is also Co-Chair of the House Bipartisan Pro-Choice Caucus.

Other skeptics wondered if DeGette would continue the forceful defense of Schroeder's interests, such as women, minorities, and traditional liberal causes. The dubious soon

under the law is remembered as the end of an era. King's death trailed the final demise of Jim Crow by less than a half decade. President Johnson swept his signature across bills supporting civil and voting rights in the mid-'60s, which officially buried the aged Southern separation of citizens by race.

While racism persisted in America, the great Civil Rights battles left the nation an epoch of idealism, egalitarianism, and a shattering reassessment of archaic traditions. The peace symbol found expression in the words of King and his comrades with striking similarity to the anti-war demonstrations. And hippie communes preaching tolerance didn't deviate from the unity expressed from numerous African-American pulpits. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment was surviving often violent responses to Civil Rights leaders' calls for equality. Skirmishes between unarmed marchers and lawmen's munitions failed to subdue The Movement.

Many Americans barely had more than a passing introduction to the entire sweep of The Movement. In the post-King era of Saigon's fall and Watergate, the majority of lynchings and murders endured a relative silence until historians cast a probing stare at the times of Bull Connor and Sheriff Jim Clark. The shooting of Medgar Evers received notice at the time, but remains obscure to many Americans, even today. The disappearance of three Freedom Riders outside Philadelphia, Mississippi, waited a quarter century to become part of American culture with the Hollywood production of *Mississippi Burning*.

Today, The Movement's ideals are more often represented in the U.S. Congress and the courts. Colorado's 1st Congressional District embraces an alchemy of the city's cultures and backgrounds. DeGette is a White woman whose lifetime goals are defined by the assassination of a Black man. DeGette represents female professionals raising young children. Her presence at minority celebrations and tragedies mean those same occasions will find their presence on her legislative agenda. Articles and letters in publications submitted by DeGette champion minority interests with as much stridency than those composed by African Americans and Hispanics.

DeGette hasn't deviated from the convictions of an idealistic child enraptured by images of

discovered their doubts were groundless. DeGette rushed to the forefront of topics covering everything from the environment to weapons control. Her strong promotion of women and minority rights defined her as one of their staunchest and sturdiest champions.

DeGette demands attention to other concerns for justice. She authored the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides health insurance to low-income children under 18, and she brought attention to the need for more resources for "safety net" hospitals, which serve lower income and uninsured patients, by sponsoring and passing a plan to increase funding.

She strenuously pushes legislation that would control advertising and marketing of tobacco products to minors. DeGette cited recent studies that confirmed long-held suspicions that tobacco marketing targeted minority children. Billboards advertising cigarette brands often appear in financially strapped neighborhoods populated largely by minorities. A similar pattern of minority targeting is apparent in specialized publications for Hispanic, African-American, and American-Indian audiences.

DeGette foretold the concern of many Americans when she attempted to dissuade colleagues from passing the Patriot Act in its entirety. Media reports of civil rights and liberties eclipsed by the Patriot Act finds many citizens suspicious of the law as passed, and demanding a more reasoned response to terrorist threats.

The shock following September 11 led many in Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, to quickly pass The Patriot Act, believing their constituents desired the law. DeGette worked the floor attempting to dissuade colleagues against adopting the bill. Today, bipartisan lawmakers are reconsidering their decision. DeGette, and a group of lawmakers breaking party lines, are trying to repeal the more intrusive restrictions of The Patriot Act. "As it turned out, this (law) was another situation where the constituents know better than the elected officials because they found out their constituents are totally opposed to it," said DeGette. "If we restrict our civil liberties because of the attacks on September 11, then the terrorists will have won."

DeGette isn't timid about opposing the Bush Administration, whether confronting the

King's life, causes, and death. Her commitment took her to law school. Her loyalty to The Movement found her traveling roads once walked by Civil Rights crusaders.

DeGette reflected on a lifelong dedication to All-American equality with the *Spectrum* several weeks ago. During a return to her district, DeGette recalled Dr. King's influence on her own career. The most powerful and important emblem in her Denver office -- the American flag -- symbolizes both her constituents and crusades.

During DeGette's early education, Denver teachers failed to inform their students about the atrocities committed in their own nation against Blacks. They also left unspoken the names of heroes and heroines risking their lives to end the injustice of segregation and discrimination.

"I was growing up in the '60s and '70s. For school children in Denver, the Civil Rights Movement was really a distant thing," said DeGette. Her family maintained a comfortable space between the household and politics. "My parents were apolitical," recalled DeGette.

Many in America were blissfully unaware of struggles for racial equality and the fierce Southern resistance. The images of sock hops and letter jackets had barely given way to the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. Some conservative leaders longingly recalled the days before Elvis brought Black music into the mainstream with Rock and Roll and pined for times when decency demanded that the Hays Office monitor Hollywood productions. But the murder of a Nobel Laureate loudly informed the nation of wars waged in courts, Congress, and Southern swamps, and wiped away any broad ignorance perpetuated on television by the lingering Pollyanna mentality of June Cleaver, *I Like Ike* buttons, and buzzcuts.

DeGette became a follower of the enlightened generation, refusing to stay stranded in past days of pretentious bliss preceding the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, and Watergate.

DeGette graduated magna cum laude from Colorado College and attended NYU Law School on a Public Interest Scholarship; where she was a Root-Tilden scholar. Her law degree armed DeGette for the battle for equality she first envisioned as a child. She returned to Colorado

executive branch about Iraq, repressed civil liberties, or indifference to minority concerns. "If anybody dares to disagree with the administration, they call you unpatriotic. They say you need to support the president no matter. ... I think that's very disturbing, and it almost reeks of McCarthyism," DeGette stated. She also observed how communities of color -- particularly Arab Americans -- have been among the first groups suffering restrictions of freedom of speech and increased surveillance. "In particular, I think Arab Americans have been scrutinized in a way that we haven't really done to a group since the Japanese internment camps of World War II." She noted that other minorities are unduly regarded suspiciously.

DeGette doesn't praise the Bush Administration for advancing minority interests. In fact, she points out that the administration is reversing some strides. "And in some instances, I think the administration would actually like to take the cause of rights backwards," DeGette offered, by mentioning the rollbacks of some freedoms such as restrictions on free speech by Ashcroft's Justice Department. "There's no desire on the part of this administration to move the cause of equality and civil rights forward. It's just not a priority of theirs." She asserted that the administration favors corporate America and the wealthy over a civil rights agenda.

DeGette recently donated a flag, which once flew over the U.S. Capitol, to a middle school in her district, replacing one that was tattered and worn. DeGette offered the flag as a symbol of a vibrant democracy and repeated her favorite line from the Pledge of Allegiance, *And Justice For All*. "The Pledge of Allegiance is something I think we still have to strive for in this country," stressed DeGette.

DeGette and her oldest daughter were recently on a Civil Rights Pilgrimage, organized by U.S. Congressman John Lewis (D-GA). The Civil Rights Pilgrimage is an unaffiliated group dedicated to bringing bipartisan members of Congress together to discuss equality and civil rights issues "through a lens of personal ethics and personal belief in an appropriate way."

DeGette spoke about walking the bridge at Selma and driving into Birmingham. "John would say, 'This is where the police rode up upon their horses and beat us with the billy clubs.'" Entering Birmingham, Lewis showed

and began her career as a public defender. Representing insolvent and powerless clients continued when she entered private practice.

"Throughout all those years, I did a lot of civil rights law, 1st Amendment law, and a lot of employment law -- standing up for people who had been discriminated against in employment because of their race, gender, or disability," DeGette explained. Whether in the aged struggle against both gender and race bias, or the frontier of physical and mental disabilities, her law practice accepted complaints from a range of people traditionally without recourse before the Civil Rights Era exposed a battlefield strewn with casualties of the Constitution's guarantee of equality.

Some minorities still confront discrimination, albeit through more subtle expressions. Sexism is more veiled than it was in the days of Susan B. Anthony or even Betty Frieden, but still exists, as does discrimination against people with disabilities. The continued resistance to equality burdened DeGette's schedule as an attorney, encouraging her to tackle injustice by legislating statewide rather than piecemeal with individual lawsuits.

"After I had been practicing law for some years, I realized I could help people one case at a time or I could get elected to office and really make laws that would help change society," said DeGette. Her original affront at injustice first encountered with reels viewed in childhood remained core to her evolving goals. "I've always remained true to that." Her convictions led to her election to the Colorado House of Representatives in 1992.

DeGette's ascension to assistant minority leader, after a brief time in the Colorado House, led many citizens to regard the fledgling state representative with respect. One of her legislative feats, the "bubble law," survived a challenge before the U.S. Supreme Court. The "bubble law" she sponsored forbids intimidating, or hindering women when they seek medical services -- a response to phalanxes of abortion opponents who greet women with damnation and hellfire at the entrances of clinics and doctors' offices.

DeGette's next move presented a daunting challenge. Pat Schroeder's decision to retire from Congress after representing Colorado's 1st

the group where the Freedom Riders arrived by bus, and pointed out the spot where outraged opponents of the demonstrators assaulted them. On the trip, Pilgrimage members talked with veterans of the civil rights era who had attended church where King delivered blistering sermons preaching equality and brotherhood. "It was an extraordinary trip," DeGette summarized. She plans to repeat the experience by introducing her youngest daughter to history when they attend the Commemoration of the March on Washington in 2005.

Back home in Colorado's 1st Congressional District, DeGette has made history of her own. In addition to gaining a national reputation for vigorous support of causes central to her life, she also responds forcefully to suspected injustice on the local level. The shooting of Paul Childs caused DeGette to intensely scrutinize details of the disabled child's death and speak out about "disturbingly high" instances of police shootings in Denver in the past decade.

The Greater Denver Ministerial Alliance, the most powerful and cohesive consortium of clergy throughout the metropolitan area, unanimously endorsed DeGette's last re-election bid by praising her commitment to the African-American community. The group noted that she remained visible in minority affairs at more than merely celebratory functions and gatherings. DeGette's omnipresence in the minority community earned the trust of African Americans and the collaboration of the Greater Denver Ministerial Alliance, comprised largely of ministers representing African-American congregations.

"Representative DeGette's demonstrated commitment to the African-American and minority communities, her strong support for women's issues, her pro-environment stance, and her position on crime, education, minority businesses, and health issues are among the many reasons that she was unanimously endorsed by the Alliance," said the Reverend Willie D. Simmons, president of the Alliance.

Whether shepherding investigations of alleged injustices, laboring to author bills assisting the indigent, attending low-profile community meetings, or speaking at media-saturated events such as the recent memorial of the legendary Arie Taylor, DeGette has become Denver's national voice.

Congressional District for 24 years spurred DeGette's campaign to succeed an "icon." Schroeder's charges into frays garnered national exposure, with people either cheering or chiding. But the milquetoast politics of focus groups didn't concern Schroeder as she railed against institutional restraints on women and minorities, and challenged conservative traditions in the military.

DeGette hails her predecessor as a wall buster who allowed countless others, including herself, to tread her in her wake. "When I ran for that seat, I decided that I would not try to be Pat Schroeder, Jr. That would be a big mistake. Not only is my personality different from Pat's, but the times are different and they require different leadership," observed DeGette. The two maintain a close friendship.

The seismic shift in DeGette's life experienced as a child resonated in her words as she spoke to the Spectrum about King's influence and when she reflected on how she expanded the goal of equality and justice to other embattled groups and constituents.

And Justice For All are words that reflect King's dream, an aspiration that remains elusive today. DeGette explained her obsession with continuing the struggle. "I always had this strong sense of justice even as a child. And I think what got me so involved in these issues is this sense of justice and how we have still not reached that in our society."

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